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AN ESSAY ON DRESS

A. W. MAY

Bertha Johnston
with best wishes
DRESS July 1. 1888

A PAPER READ BEFORE THE
ASSOCIATION FOR THE ADVANCEMENT
OF WOMEN

BY
ABBY W. MAY

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Miss Bertha Johnston

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SO MANY good and wise things have been said about dress that one is tempted to dismiss the subject as well-nigh exhausted; and yet that can hardly be while Fashion holds such strange sway as she does to-day, regardless alike of good taste, of sound sense, or of any lofty principle. Or if, indeed, all the good things have been said, it seems needful to recall them over and over again, until, by line upon line, and precept upon precept, they shall make themselves heard and understood.

I trust I may be pardoned for saying that I believe there is no subject more needing to be discussed by right-minded women to-day, than this very one of which I speak. For it underlies — yes, undermines to an inconceivable extent —

the lives and the living of women. Let me say, however, that I do not come here to teach, but only to open the way to a discussion that, I trust, will be of service to us all.

If we ask ourselves Why is the subject of dress of such consequence? I think the answer will follow, Because a comparatively unimportant and external thing has come to stand as of the very first importance to the great majority of those women who are left free to order their own lives. I was once greatly pained to hear a bright young girl confess that if she were asked, suddenly, What are you thinking about? she would almost always be obliged to answer "About dress." It was even more painful to hear a devout woman, of years and wide experience say, "I believe that the majority of women, if entering heaven to-day, would ask, not 'Where is my Lord?' but 'What do they wear here?'" Of course I do not mean to say that these fairly represent all women, young and old. They are doubtless somewhat extreme instances. But I do mean to say that the women who

do not give an undue prominence to the question of clothes are the very few, and are recognized as exceptional on all sides, both by those who disapprove and by those who commend their course.

What, then, is the proper place to be assigned to dress in the thoughts and the lives of women who would fain do their whole duty? Is there any underlying principle involved, and, if so, what is it, or what should it be?

I think we must admit that there are two controlling principles, the physiological and the moral or spiritual; that these work together, that they are reinforced by mental power interpreting and guiding; and that the other great quality of our five-fold nature — namely, the affectional or philanthropic — must here, as elsewhere, help us in seeing and in doing our duty to our fellow-beings. We are our brothers' keepers, and have no right to shape a course for ourselves alone. I am not forgetting the artistic side of our nature, which bids us to cultivate to the highest point the knowledge

and love of beauty; but neither shall I forget that this means true beauty, and not the spurious thing to which Fashion often gives the name; nor will I forget that the realm of beauty is in the highest places, and that the external expression which it finds in dress is among the least valuable and least important of its manifestations.

I need not dwell on the physiological principle. That, I think, is becoming well understood; and, at all events, there is every opportunity for learning of it. The reform has spread far and wide, and all women, if they will, may know that freedom for the development and activity of every organ is needed, and may also know how to gain this; even the fashion-books giving patterns and directions for clothes that shall be light and loose, and warm or cool, as the changing seasons may require. To know that God has established laws for the body is to recognize the duty of obedience thereto, and we may well be grateful to those women who, in our day, have made a healthful dress easy of

attainment. They have given to women a present help, and a great new hope for the future. If there be some women here to-day who have not donned their "freedom suits," as these improved garments have been wittily called, let me beg them to put the same to speedy proof. Never did a woman come out of the old dispensation into the new, who did not feel that, for her, life had begun again. She was like a new creature.

But the moral side of the question is far less understood. Not, perhaps, because it is difficult, but because it runs against many personal habits of thought and action, and, more than that, because it puts one in opposition to the world's established standards. Healthful under- or even outside-garments are possible, and this is by many women claimed in their favor, with an extravagance and a display that are full of harm. I trust you have admitted with me that we are our sisters' keepers. The poor, the weak, and those low down in the scale of comforts and advantages, look up to those more for-

fortunate than they, — those who have money and culture and a position that make them leaders in society, — and strive to imitate them. Do not say that this is all wrong. We know that it is inevitable; perhaps we must also admit that it is right. To aspire is one of the noblest of desires; and the humble classes ought to look up to those whom the world has recognized as exalted, and ought to imitate them. God forgive us that it is necessary to take exception to this, and to say, — not so, because the world has accepted for its leaders those who are not worthy to lead. To say that there should be leaders, and that they should be followed, is not to say that those less able should give up self-respect and a good measure of independence; but it is to recognize the true function of leadership in the world, and to say that these leaders are responsible not only for opening the way wisely, but also for showing those who follow in it how to preserve unharmed a fine self-respect and independence. But what are the women of our upper classes doing to-day? They are acting not as noble

leaders should, but are setting an example of servile following of fashions that are vulgar, and tasteless, and senseless, and extravagant; that, as a rule, have no justification for their being, except that idle, and worse than idle, women create a demand for show and for constant change, that others—men and women—make it their business to supply. I will not try to measure the burden that the fortunate women are to-day laying upon their less able sisters by the force of this example. You know it—or may know it—better than any words of mine could describe it. If there be among you those who have never given thought to this side of the dress-question, let me beg such to draw upon their keenest imaginations for the facts, which cannot be exaggerated. They mean life-wasting effort and anxiety; an expenditure for the showy and the useless that cripples and starves the better side of the nature; they mean such heavy pressure as makes proper care of and thought for others impossible; and, worse than all, they lead to such a perversion of the moral nature as strews the

land with the wrecks of women. God only knows how long and how slow may be the process that shall repair and restore those whom we—not he—call lost. And yet, are *they* so much worse than we, if we help these little ones to offend? It is a shocking picture; and yet it is one that all of us ought to keep before our eyes to help us in our daily living.

Let us turn from the question of how our dress affects others, and ask, now, what it should be in itself.

1. I should say it must be appropriate, both to the style and the work of the wearer. But here we come at once upon the sad fact that many women have no work worthy of the name. For such women, if blest with good health, there is no pity too profound, no blame too marked, if any of us had the right to blame. We will not judge them. But we must and we will recognize the fact that the world is full of work waiting to be done; and that all fields are now open to women. Literature, art, science, philanthropy, the professions, busi-

ness, — these are all ready for women, who may choose their paths. Those who need not to choose, having received the great gift of home duties and of responsibility for the welfare of families, have the noblest mission ready to their hands. There is no work more important than that of making home, in the best sense, helpful and happy for its inmates. In doing this, the best self-culture is needed and is gained. And yet there are women, able to work, who choose idleness in preference to any of these occupations; whose only work is “fancy-work,” so-called, which carries a libel and a contradiction in its very name. Let me step aside for a moment to beg women — especially young women — to consider well before they ever again lend their hands and their brains to the manufacture of useless fancy articles; worse than useless many of them indeed are, for they create empty needs, pervert the taste, and multiply cares for some one, while they dilute and undermine our living. Far better to fold the hands, and let the brain lie idle, than to occupy

either in making things that have no real place in the life of any real person,—that, indeed, the world would be better without. I know it is said that the sick and the old find great solace in such light occupation. I grant it. They surely deserve our tenderest consideration; and theories of living, that must needs be somewhat stern and urgent to keep the able ones up to the high mark of duty, must find all possible exceptions in the case of these sufferers. But even they may always find agreeable employment for their feeble hands and their weary minds in ways that shall be both helpful and beautiful in their results. Hitherto, custom, demanding little of the so-called women of leisure, has limited their range of work, and kept low their standards of duty. But give higher ideals and wider opportunities to women; demand of them devotion to the great things of the world; then when old age and sickness come, as come they may to all of us, they will find our hands and minds trained to seek and to find relaxation, as well as occupation, in healthier

ways than in making the costly and aimless trifles that now burden so many homes, waste such amounts of wealth, and fritter away lives that in God's great economy must be meant for noble uses. There is variety enough in his world to meet every need, whether of labor or of rest.

Fitness, then, is the first requisite, and this means that the dress must be adapted to every real need in life, from those of the body upwards.

2. Perhaps neatness is the next characteristic, and this can admit of no qualification. If to be a "lady" means to be a truly refined woman, externally as well as internally, then every true woman must of course desire to be a lady. Those who care little for the fundamental womanly qualities are those who, perhaps, make most account of the ladylike exterior and seeming; so that it seems safe to assume that every woman at heart wishes to be a lady. But no lady can wear a dress that is vulgar or untidy. I do not forget that our streets have been swept for years by

the trailing garments of those who claim to be ladies; and I confess to being daily staggered by the fact that among these are some of the very lovely women, very bright, very intelligent, very right-minded too,—women whom we want to hold up as our models in every respect. How they can fail us, in a matter so simple and so easy of attainment as this, is to me an insoluble mystery. Is it from thoughtlessness? Ah! but thought, even for minor things, is a fundamental characteristic of a true woman; and surely it is not too much to expect that the instinct of the lady will save her from the need of thought in avoiding habits and customs in dress that are obviously vulgar and untidy, in spite of the painted mask with which Fashion strives to disguise them. Other excuses may be offered for obedience to a disgusting fashion; but I know of none that goes deep enough to be worthy of much consideration.

3. The question of expense is a most important one. It would seem to be a foregone conclusion that little money can be spent by women

who have but little. But they have to remember that money is not the only expenditure involved. Time and thought, as well as money, are talents to be accounted for. Usually, indeed, from a very small money income something might and ought to be saved, to meet the higher needs of the individual, and the greater need of some needier person. But those women who, as they say, can "afford to dress as they please," have need to weigh in the light of principle all the questions involved, and "please" to do right, in this as in other matters. It is urged, "but women who have husbands must dress to please them, and this often leads to great extravagance and display." I certainly shall not question, for one moment, the duty of the wife to seek to gratify her husband's taste and wishes. But I incline to the opinion that this excuse has much less foundation than is claimed for it. I have never known a wife who, if she chose, could not dress to please her husband, while yet she met her own idea of principle, to a very great degree. Of course there must be cases in which this is very difficult, and

indeed impossible; for there are many low-toned and vain men in the world. But if we could discover a world in which all the women were high-toned, I fancy we should find few men exacting in this particular direction; and I believe you agree with me in this.

4. A very obvious characteristic of dress is its taste; and here I wish I could say a strong and convincing word on the duty of every woman to seek for beauty (I mean, of course, genuine beauty) in attire, as in all that belongs to herself. Perhaps no one regards this as of greater consequence than I do. But certainly no one would repudiate more vehemently than I, the falseness of the standard set up for our study and imitation. Friends, when we want to study a thing, we go to the high waters whence is its source, not to the perverted and the muddy stream flowing over the lowlands, where are all foul things. And I say, in this matter of dress, let us study beauty in and for itself. It can be found, not in the fashion-plates, that call a thing beautiful to-day which next month they will find

hideous, simply because out of fashion. "A thing of beauty is a joy forever." Let us take that as one of the tests of beauty. How does the last year's hat or dress meet this test? There are others as clean-cut and decisive. There are beauties of color, both in its harmonies and its contrasts; there are beauties of line and form; and all these have their laws, which may be studied and understood, as well as their subtleties, which can only be felt, but which will be lived out, if we are in their spirit. I will not fail to acknowledge that one cannot try to walk in this direction without bringing criticism upon herself, for almost never,—mark the telling fact!—almost never can one who would dress beautifully follow the fashion. But I will say, in justice to my fellow-beings, that a woman who accepts a principle in dress is sure to find the criticism almost solely respectful and kindly; and I will say further that the faithfulness of numbers of women to a high standard in this regard has already made a well-worn path in which every woman may to-day find the footing not over-difficult. That these women

do not at once seem to succeed in finding that beauty in dress which we all desire is owing largely to the fact that the universal taste is so grossly perverted that lookers-on do not know beauty when they see it; partly, also, to the fact that they who would be faithful to a standard of dress that shall include beauty, as well as the more fundamental attributes, are often among the busiest, and must somewhat postpone the effort to make their apparel beautiful, while the world is full of ignorance, and sin, and suffering, which need to be lifted up, enlightened, and comforted. We may indeed find it easy to forgive a somewhat tasteless dress if it is worn by a Florence Nightingale, a Mary Carpenter, a George Eliot, or any woman who is fully occupied with the world's deep needs. One help to success in searching for beauty in dress may be found in seeking it through simplicity. The fine Greek and other accepted models of early times teach this, and the highest standards of modern times point in the same direction. There is room and need for much to be said on this point, but it

must be said by an artist, to do justice to the theme.

5. We must not forget that a certain amount of individuality should characterize the dress of every woman, else it would not be beautiful for her. To-day, the tall and the short, the slender and the stout, the grave and the gay, the dark and the light, the young and the old, and all others,—if others there be,—must dress after much the same models; and that, forsooth, is what the world accepts as beauty in dress. It will not always be so. Indeed, to-day, there are enough honorable exceptions to give us hope for the future. Do not think I counsel or believe in oddity, for oddity's sake. I do not. But I ask each right-minded woman to study,—as far as she may, without giving undue prominence to this question, to the exclusion of others more important,—I ask her to study her own conditions, and so far modify the existing style that it shall cost only so much time, thought, and money as she has the real right to expend;

that it shall be suited to her work, to her age, to her seeming; that it shall mean comfort and elevation to herself; and that it shall help others to seek and to find the right. Those exquisite words, "And men took knowledge of them that they had been with Jesus," have a beautiful application here. Find the woman of fashion to-day, whose appearance, as she walks the streets, shall allow the passers-by to think that she has ever been in high places, and I will admit that the influence of such dress may not always be wholly for harm. You cannot ask me to admit it until then. But every thoughtful woman knows full well that *triviality* is written all over the modern dress; and that it is hard to believe that a high-minded woman may be within it, in spite of the fact that an intimate acquaintance shows us that there are exceptions even to this rule, and that among fashionably-dressed women may be found some who are altogether right-minded on other subjects. We only wish that their eyes might be opened in this direction too, that

they might be models in all respects for the rest of us. They are too good and too true, many of them, to fail in doing the right thing when they see it. But now, the gifts and graces of womanly deportment and bearing, that might belong in some degree to every woman, are, in most cases, lost in the manners prescribed by the fashion, and put on and taken off with the garments, to which alone they belong. Is it not pitiful to think of manners that are as external as the gloves? It is worse than idle to say that such a standard of dress—the prevailing standard to-day—is harmless, or is consistent with genuine high living. There is no position nor relation in life in which dress, if founded upon the principles which have been indicated, does not help the world along. It is equally true that there is no position where unprincipled dress does not hurt the wearer, and all who feel her influence. I doubt if such a thing is possible as elaborate dressing that does not cost the wearer time and thought, yes, and power of soul, too, somewhat in proportion to its

elaboration, and consequently in excess of proportion to the other demands of life; but, if it were possible, there would still be countless objections to it,—as its expense in other directions; if fashionable, its certain ugliness; and its bad influence, upon which I have already dwelt at sufficient length. May it not be true that all dress is wrong which cannot be imitated by humble women, in their humble way, without an appearance of *vulgarity* in the copy? I am not sure that this is true in all cases, but it is very often so.

There are, doubtless, those among you who have agreed with me to some extent, and who will ask, "What can be done to make these things better?" And some will say, "Let there be organization among right-minded women to secure the desired end." To me this is not the answer, though I can see no objection to trying for some united action. My answer would be, let every woman be fully persuaded in her own mind of her duty as regards dress, and then let her strive to do her duty, simply, quietly, un-

tentatiously. In that spirit she could not go far astray. I think her path would not be travelled in bloomers, nor marked by any action that would lead to martyrdom. I think her serious thought would lead her first to acknowledge that dress should occupy no higher than a secondary place. The higher needs of her own nature would inevitably tempt her to find ways to meet them; and the bitter suffering and sorrow, with which the world is full, would forever forbid her to gratify her own desires and tastes until she had shared her blessings with those who so sorely lack. This first step taken, I think she would find that, almost without knowing it,—for she has lifted herself to a higher plane than she knew before,—her dress had become simpler, more appropriate to herself, less wasteful of time, and thought, and money, and, oh! by far more beautiful than when she dressed merely as fancy and fashion dictated; and I think that before many months had passed she would have found the question so far laid for herself that it would seldom trouble her again. Not till then could

she know the comfort, yes, the true pleasure, to be found in dress,—the sort of pleasure that birds or trees might take in the feathers or the foliage which is their clothing. If this might be true for herself, it would also be true that she had become, more fully than she had ever dreamed of being, a help to others by her example and influence. All of us have influence, more or less extended, direct and indirect. It does not concern us to ask how wide it is, or to extenuate in ourselves any folly or lack of principle because it is but narrow. Its extent is not, but its quality is, within our own control; and it does concern us all to ask ourselves what this quality is, and to make it fine. I am not sure which is most contagious, a good or an evil example. They are both so powerful that we may not dare to trifle. But busy women are not apt to give much thought to the extent of their influence. I remember one such, staying in a little village among the White Mountains, amid surroundings so beautiful that the outside world, with all its complications, was almost forgotten, who was

wakened most unexpectedly to a sense of the power of example and of fashion's sway. She wore, as had been her habit, a dress without the superfluity of an overdress, technically so called. Her excellent landlady said to her, at parting, "I want to thank you for having made it possible for me to go without an overskirt this winter. I have a dress which is very good, and will last me the winter through; but it has no overskirt, and I thought I must lay it aside and manage in some way to get another that might have an overskirt. Now, I shall wear the one I have, and I thank you." Think of it! In that retired village, with only a handful of inhabitants, and with no wealth, with perhaps hardly the average of New England comfort, the power of a fashion brought from the gay French capital had so asserted itself that she—a woman of good culture and of the firmest New England principle—had not thought of resisting its sway, though she could by no means afford either the money or the effort demanded. When a rich woman, from one of the acknowledged centres of

influence, showed her that the thing could be done, it was a revelation. Who knows but that we, all of us, may often help or hinder in some such vital ways?

I will not omit to say that even more directly than by example may those of you, who wish to help the world along in this direction, find means to do so. They who have the training of our youth have especial opportunities for service. Let every wise mother and every judicious teacher determine that she will never do anything to set up false standards in the young, growing minds and hearts; but that she will endeavor to undermine such, and to raise high standards instead, by the slow, but everlastingly sure, process of principle. Each new year promises progress from this source, which every woman may help to hasten, in ways too numerous to mention. I will indicate only one other. It is this. That each one of us may, at this very moment, pledge herself never again to utter a word that may hinder any one who is desirous of living above the follies of fashion. This alone — this refraining

from sharp criticism, or from the ridicule that cuts so deeply — would be of incalculable service. Is it much to ask, that we promise to refrain from speech that might hinder others from doing the duty that we do not recognize, perhaps because we wilfully shut our eyes, and still our consciences?

Friends, there will always be in the world idle and self-indulgent women, who find nothing better to do than to dress; but for all who desire the highest things, there is a better part. Shall we not believe in it and seek it?

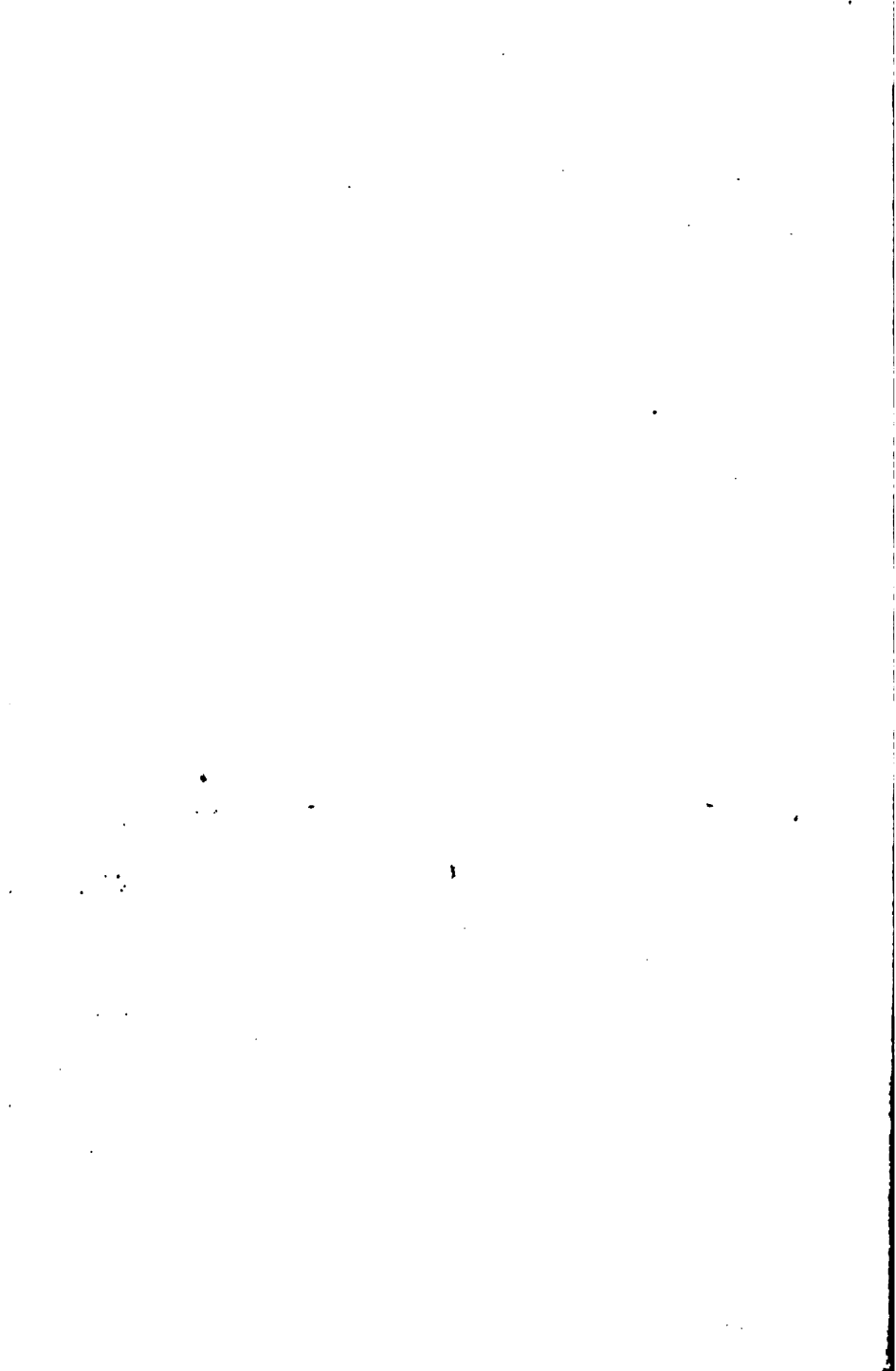
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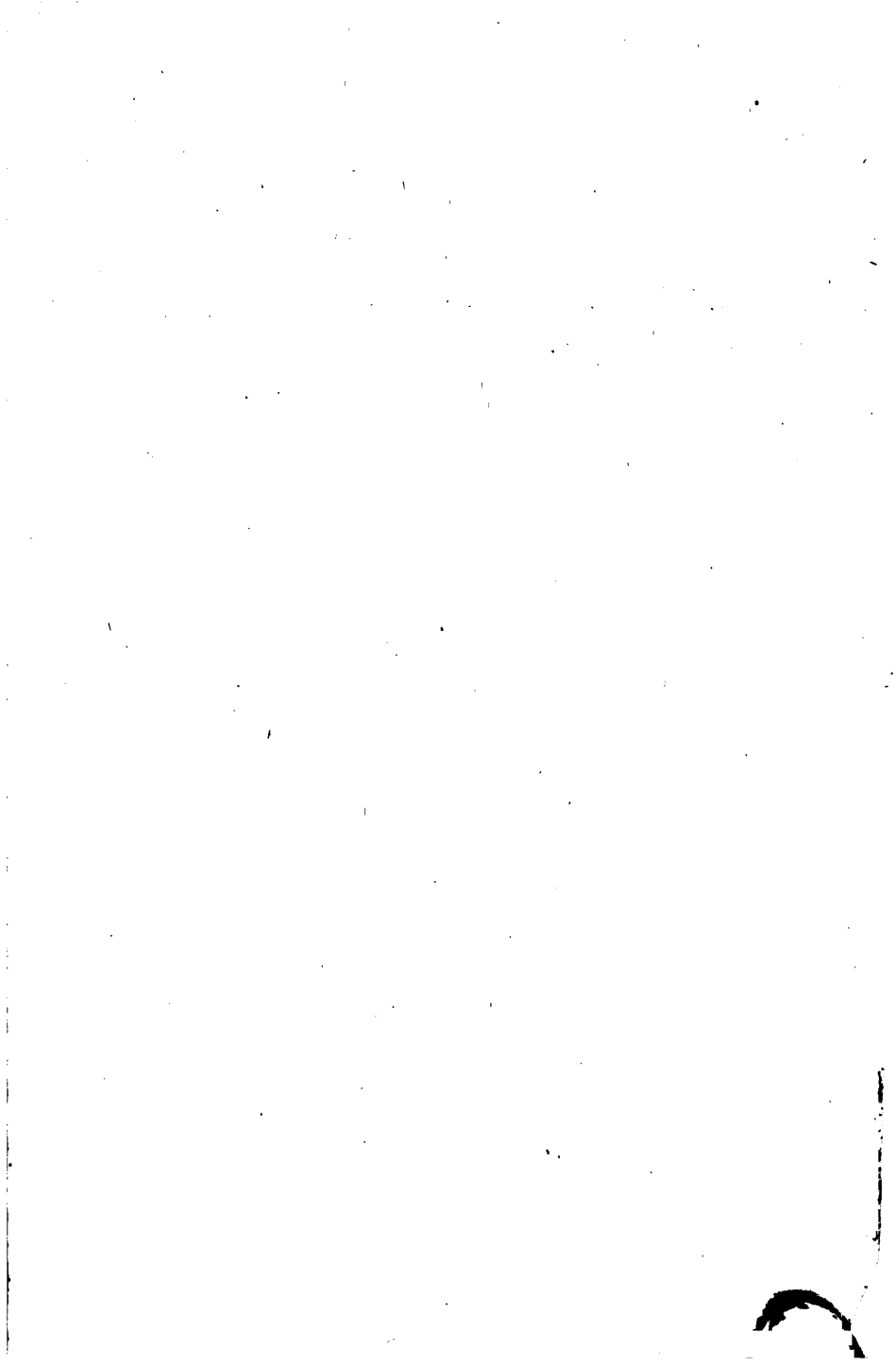
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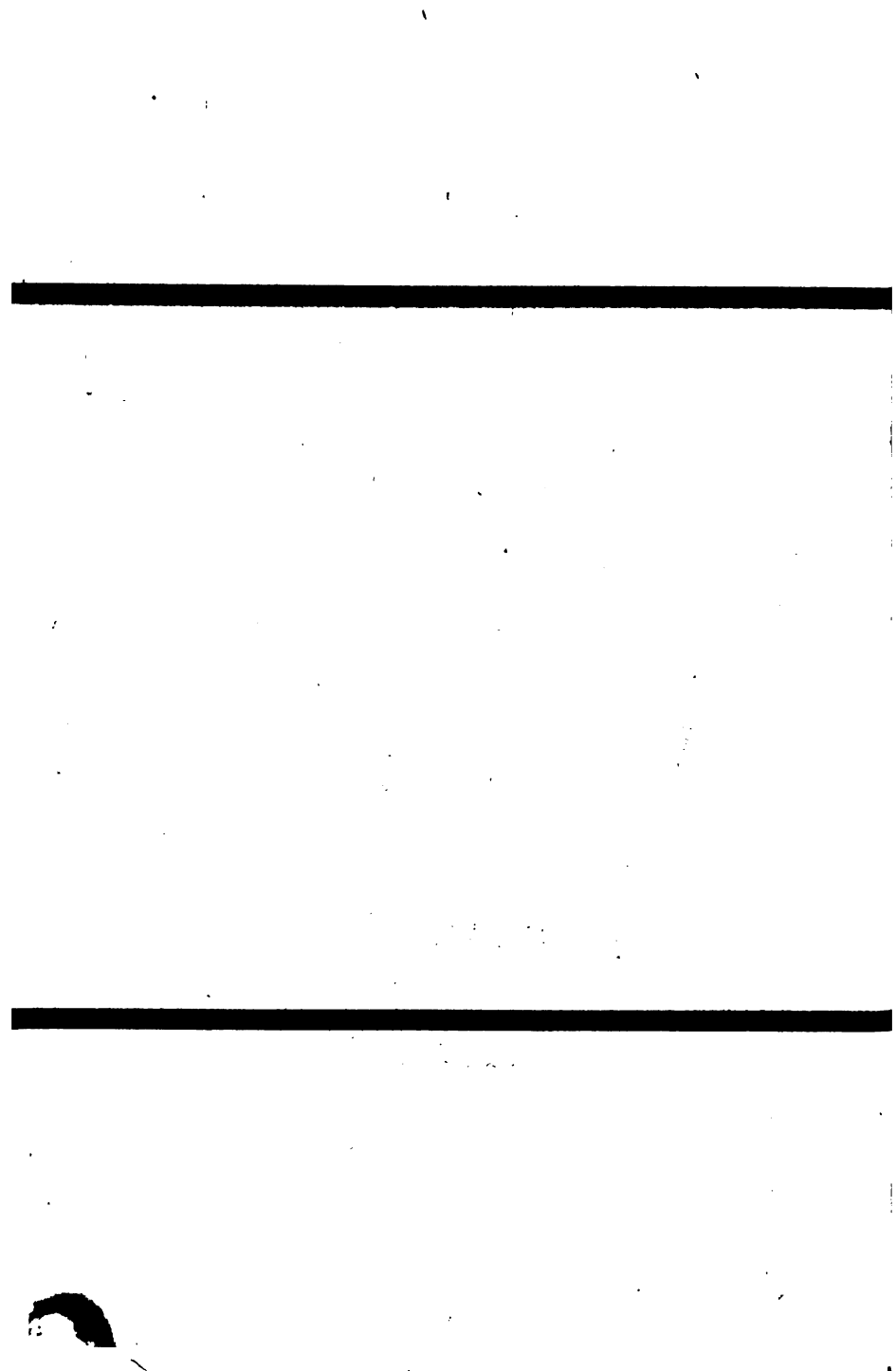
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